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A mixed bag in Norwalk

by [Alexander Soule](#)

As developers push ahead with residential projects in Fairfield County heading into the second half, commercial components of the mixed-use projects are having mixed success in signing up tenants.

Both sides of the coin are visible in Norwalk. More than a year after it opened, AvalonBay Norwalk still has street-level retail space available, though it has generated tenants for a nearby retail complex; just to the north, the neighborhood where the Summerview Square development is has filled in with multiple commercial tenants in the past several months.

In Fairfield and Westchester counties, planners are limiting much new development to existing neighborhoods near mass transit, counting on urban dwellers to draw new commercial enterprises – and vice versa. That makes the commercial component of mixed-use projects critical to the success of new residential buildings, with no better exhibit than Building and Land Technology's Harbor Point development, which despite the recession proved a magnet for businesses and residents alike in Stamford's South End.

In an Arizona Department of Transportation study published in mid-May that received national attention, researchers found that traffic congestion was far lower on streets that had a high density of households and businesses, a seeming non sequitur given the increased number of people coming and going. The takeaway, of course, is that more residents results in fewer vehicle owners, thereby cutting traffic.

The point is not lost on Fairfield County builders, who have increased residential permit applications this year even as Connecticut's statewide totals have declined.

The expectations for a mutually beneficial effect will be critical in getting stalled projects moving, including District 95-7 in Norwalk that contemplates more than 600,000 square feet of space; and Waypointe further north,

One can live without the other – Toll Brothers has had an easy time finding residents for its Summit at Bethel residences built on a hilltop overlooking Danbury, despite the fact that the project's location makes it a difficult trek to many area businesses. Even in Redding, which has one of the smallest commercial districts in Fairfield County, many new restaurants are sprouting on the town's short Main St., even though the Georgetown Land Development Co. residential village planned for the former Gilbert & Bennett factory site has been delayed.

Still, the ideal formula features both – if not as a classic mixed-use development, than as a residential project contributing to a revitalized local commercial sector. A case in point is Summerview Square, according to Joanne Carroll, publisher of "Connecticut Builder," and an officer of the Home Builders Association of Connecticut.

Since construction began just off Main St. in Norwalk, nearby business expansions include:

- Painter's Supply at 106 Main St., which held its grand opening in April;
- Valencia Luncheria, a Venezuelan restaurant that is expanding to bigger space at 172 Main St.; and
- Blackstone's Steak House, which relocated from South Norwalk as construction on Summerview Square commenced.

"As a straight rental, Summerview Square seems to be the right formula for this market," Carroll said.